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THE LATE PROFESSOR A. B. DAVIDSON, D.D., LL.D.

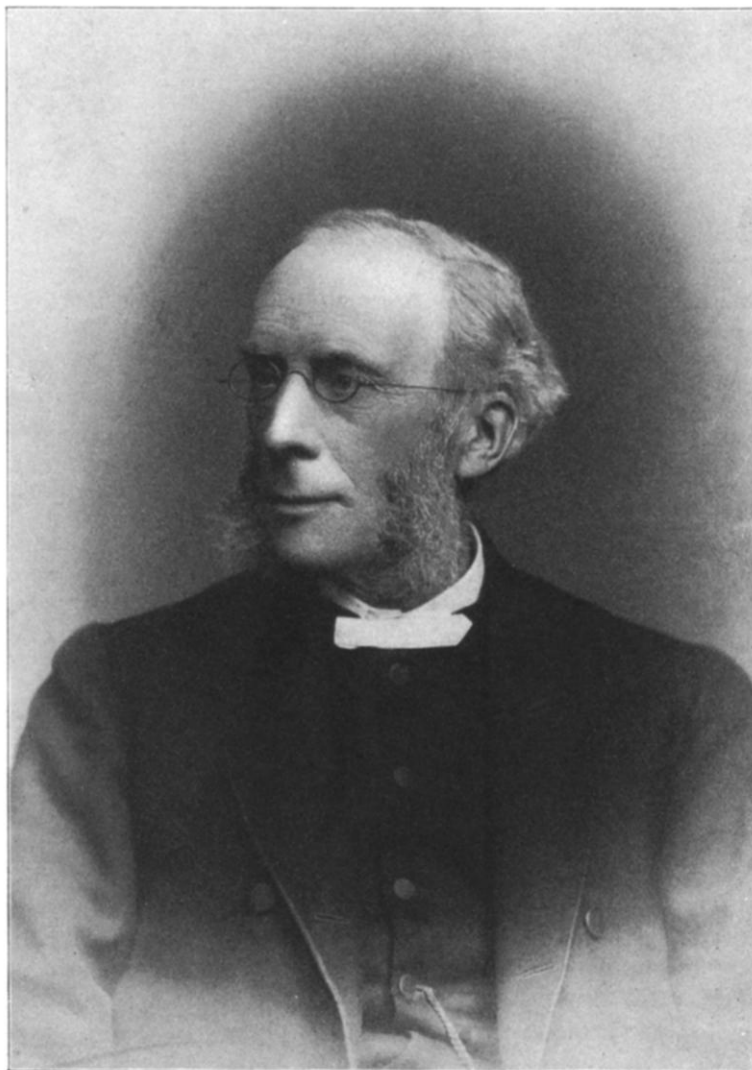
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IT is not reverence alone that stays a disciple's hand from writing of such a master. There was that degree of elusiveness about his personality which escapes the grasp, and renders the duty of conveying the impression to those who did not know him a forlorn hope. His gifts were conspicuous and trenchant; his learning solid and vast. But they were not the man. With a wit that left an indelible mark every time it flashed; with an authority which forces those who have felt it to do all their work, asking themselves what he would think of the performance; with a humility and kindness that won love in a moment and kept it for a lifetime—there was behind all a loneliness and seclusion of spirit which, while it fascinates, defies penetration. "A fugitive and gracious light . . . shy to illumine," he attracted only to escape. Perhaps it would be better not to attempt the secret, and to confine one's effort to the recital of qualities so many and so brilliantly combined. Yet the fascination of the man behind the gifts prevails even over the admiration which they excite.

I. EARLY YEARS.

Andrew Bruce Davidson was born and reared in a part of Scotland which also gave to the world his four most eminent pupils—Robertson Smith, William Elmslie, Peter Thomson, and John Skinner.¹ The air of his native county remained with him

¹ (1) Robertson Smith, who was born, I think, about 1846, was a "son of the manse," his father being minister of the Free Church of Scotland in the parishes of Keig and Tough, on the river Don. (2) William Gray Elmslie, born 1848, was another "son of the manse," the second son of Rev. William Elmslie, of Inch Free Church; he had a particularly successful work at Aberdeen University and New College, Edinburgh, became a famous preacher, and after a ministry at Willesden, London, was appointed professor of Hebrew in the English Presbyterian College. See his memoirs and sermons, edited by Robertson Newle, London, 1890. He was a brilliant preacher,



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to the last. As it was its accent which ever broke from his lips with the truths that stirred him most deeply, so to its keen atmosphere and strenuous life we may trace the truthfulness, the sagacity, the reserve, the shrewdness and humor which distinguished all his work. Born in 1831, on the farm of Kirkhill, near Ellon, in the county of Aberdeen, he was sent, "a ruddy-faced boy" of twelve, to Aberdeen city to be prepared in the grammar school for entrance to Marischal University.²

Davidson graduated at Marischal in 1849 with honors, but did not till 1852 begin his studies for the ministry of the Free Church of Scotland, at New College, Edinburgh.³ The intervening years were spent by him in charge of the Free Church school of his native parish. Thus from the very opening of his career he was a teacher; and I have heard from those who were among his boys at Ellon that the same love of children, the same thoroughness and charm of instruction, as distinguished him through life were then apparent. But for a short time he broke from teaching and turned to the ministry. In 1856 he was licensed to preach and served for six months as "helper" to Dr. John Macgillivray, minister of Gilcomston, one of the largest Free Church congregations in Aberdeen, and author of a notable life of St. Chrysostom. I have been told also that Davidson was appointed to the office of "lecturer" at an evening service instituted by the presbytery.⁴ In any case the originality of his preaching was already acknowledged. At Marischal College he had distinguished himself—again like his four brilliant pupils above mentioned—in mathematics, but during the

teacher, and expositor of the Old Testament. (3) Thomson was a man of rare scholarship and rarer character; assistant, like the others, to Dr. Davidson, and afterward minister at St. Fergus. He wrote a primer on the life of David, and several articles in the *Expositor*. He died in 1880. See the life of him, *A Scotch Student*, by Rev. George Steven, M.A., Edinburgh. All these three died young: Smith at forty-eight, Elmslie at forty-two, Thomson at thirty-three. (4) John Skinner, professor of Hebrew and apologetics in Westminster College, Cambridge, author of "Isaiah" in the *Cambridge Bible for Schools*.

² At that time the city had two universities, King's and Marischal. Since 1859 they have been the arts and medical colleges of the one University of Aberdeen.

³ At that time New College was the only divinity hall of the Free Church.

⁴ He also served a rural mission for some months near Blairgowrie, Perthshire.

following years he gave himself to the study of languages. In Ellon he read Greek and Latin assiduously, and mastered French, German, and Italian, to which he afterward added a knowledge of Dutch. But during his divinity course "Rabbi" Duncan "thirled" him to the study of Hebrew, and in the end of 1858 he returned to New College to be Duncan's assistant.

Dr. Nicoll has rightly said that the years of Davidson's schoolmastering in Ellon, "perhaps more than any others in his life, were the years in which he made himself. Before they were ended he had become a scholar." If we take note that they formed an unusually long interval between the close of his course in arts and his entrance on theology, we are able to assume that they were filled with other interests than those of scholarship. They must have been a time of inward questioning and struggle. He put off his approach to the ministry; and although, characteristically, he never betrayed by a word what he had come through, the effort of the human soul to find God, the experience of its failure to construct an intellectual system of religion, and its refuge in faith in the goodness of God and in surrender to His call to itself, formed the first object of Davidson's labors as an expositor of Scripture, and continued to the end his main interest in life. Such a crisis, too, explains the sympathy, the wistfulness, and the almost "desperate peace" of his mind. He must for a time have fought and lost all but God.

The new assistant to Dr. Duncan was admirably qualified to fill "the splendid gaps" in the influence of that great religious genius. "Dr. Duncan's defects as a teacher," says Dr. Moody-Stuart in his *Recollections*, "were more than supplied by the appointment of a coadjutor, Dr. Davidson, first as assistant and then as colleague, whose qualifications he always valued as of the very highest order." His work would be mainly linguistic. Davidson taught the Hebrew grammar and read the Old Testament with his pupils. To these first years at his post we may trace his unsurpassed mastery of the language, the beginnings of his *Grammar*, his work on *Hebrew Accents*, and his almost equal mastery of Arabic and Syriac. Then or later he spent a summer studying Arabic in Palestine. But with this work in

scholarship there went the other, which was more significant of the man. He wrote his great *Commentary on Job*. "The book of Job is so called from the name of the man whose history, reflections, and sayings form the subject of it." "Without doubt in all this he is the mouthpiece of the author of the book." And even when in later days he admitted that the sufferings of Israel were mirrored in those of Job, and that "the author designed that his people should see their own features in his, and from his history forecast the issue of their own"—it was, from the first and always, the struggles of the individual conscience, both against the conventional religion of its time and against Providence, which fascinated our master.

In Old Testament study, when Davidson began to profess it, there were many new interests calling to a young scholar's heart. The main lines of the analysis of the Pentateuch had been established. Ewald⁵ was busy reconstructing upon them the history of Israel's religion. Even so far away as South Africa, Colenso was in touch with this progress of German criticism, and Davidson must have equally felt its attractions. There were, too, fresh movements in the study of the text, premonitory of the work of Lagarde and others, which so immediately ensued. The view of the Semitic race as a whole was beginning to be possible, and Renan had already opened up some of its attractions. There were the fascinations of archæology. There were, as strong as ever, the orthodox interests in typology and messianic prophecy, the latter not untouched by new lights, suggestive, to an original mind like Davidson's, of possible reconstructions. And there was the alarm which fresh views inevitably excited, and the growing sense of the need of a new apologetic. That amid all these interests—textual, critical, historical, theological—this young scholar should have turned to what is, after all, the most personal and psychological of the Old Testament books, was thoroughly characteristic. To the end—whether in Saul, or Elijah, or Jeremiah, or Job—it was the religious experience of the individual, and, especially in doubt and in failure, the assertion of the personal consciousness,

⁵ Since HUPFELD's work in 1850 on the *Sources of Genesis*.

whether against dogma, or fate, or deity, which most attracted Davidson, and excited his powers to their highest pitch. In that sphere of interpretation he was unrivaled. No school or church in our day has furnished an exegete to match him there. His sympathy and his insight were immediate, exact, profound. And yet—and all the more wonderfully that they were evidently born of his own share in experiences similar to those of his hero—he was never carried away by his sympathy to impute to his subject one atom more than it contained. His intellectual justice forbade his religious genius to force a modern or selfish meaning upon any passage which he expounded.

The *Commentary on Job*, which has since obtained the praise of experts as the first really scientific commentary on the Old Testament in the English language, seemed to fail at the time to secure any notice from scholars. It is all the greater matter of pride to her sons that Davidson's own church recognized the merits of the book; and, in spite of certain grumblings about its "unsoundness," elected the author in 1863 to the Hebrew chair in New College as colleague to Dr. Duncan. His ordination followed as a matter of course. Davidson was now virtually in sole charge of the chair. Beyond several articles, he published nothing for eleven years, when his *Outlines of Hebrew Grammar* appeared. But during that time, in the varied curriculum to which he contributed—and there was not a fuller course of divinity in any theological hall—he gradually brought forward what was intrinsically the least popular of the subjects to the very first rank of all. He impressed Hebrew on the ablest students, and himself on these and all the rest. The sixties and early seventies saw a succession of some of the best graduates of Edinburgh and Aberdeen Universities pass through his hands. They started the Davidson tradition, and raised him to the eyes of the undergraduates behind them as the chief attraction which the New College had to offer. It grew the fashion for undergraduates to pay a visit to his class-room before they entered the hall; and he attracted to his lectures an increasing number of divinity students from other lands and churches.⁶ About

⁶Chiefly from Ireland, Canada, and the United States.

1866 his most brilliant pupil, Robertson Smith, came under his hands, and in 1870 passed immediately from them to the Hebrew chair in Aberdeen. By this time Davidson's fame was established. The church owned in him her greatest teacher—that was the bed-rock on which all the rest of his reputation was founded; but those who had come under his influence carried abroad the spell of his personality. They spoke of his extraordinary intellectual discipline; of his capacity for inspiring faith; and, in many of themselves, illustrated his power to kindle the fire of preaching.⁷ Thus there grew the recognition of a strong individuality, taking its own way, apart from the ordinary channels of church life, but affecting this widely through an increasing number of manse-studies and pulpits; and, whatever doubts might exist of the methods it followed, obviously making for the ends of spiritual religion. But even all this general influence would have taken a much longer time to become articulate had it not been for Robertson Smith and the rush with which he carried the critical methods he had learned under Davidson to consequences to which the latter, probably aware of their inevitableness, was more slowly moving.

II. THE ROBERTSON SMITH CASE.

The influence upon each other of a great master and a great, though differently gifted, pupil is one of the most dramatic studies which biography has to offer. The master “finding himself out” in the pupil; his influence carried beyond his own reach and beyond even his anticipation; the extent of his responsibility for views which he hesitates to indorse; the question of his duty toward these and toward his pupil who has to fight for them; the contrast of the suggestive or the skeptical temperament with the affirmative, not to say dogmatic; the pathos and possible tragedy of such a relation; the result, reactionary or progressive, in the master's opinions—here are as subtle phases of psychology as one will find in any drama. Some of them—certainly not all—were present in the case of Professors Davidson and Robertson Smith.

⁷ The leading preachers of the Free Church of Scotland at the present day have mostly been his pupils.

At the close of his undergraduate curriculum, Robertson Smith had been strongly tempted to give himself to mathematics. Professor Tait,⁸ of Edinburgh, who offered him his assistantship, urged the highest promises of a Cambridge career. Without forgetting Smith's great linguistic powers, or (still less) his sincere consecration to the ministry of Christ, one may feel that, apart from Davidson's influence and the possibilities which Davidson's teaching unfolded in Hebrew, Smith might have been lost to theology. In any case, the master's influence and authority were enhanced by his student's sudden elevation and brilliant developments; and when these led to the long controversies of 1877-82,⁹ and Smith swayed public opinion in Scotland, Davidson was recognized as the power behind the throne. During the crisis he never spoke in presbytery or synod or Assembly. Beyond recording a silent vote now and again, and putting in as silent an appearance at the meetings of Smith's supporters,

⁸ The collaborator with Sir William Thomson, now Lord Kelvin, in so many works on physics and thermo-dynamics. Professor Tait (who died last year) held the chair of natural philosophy in Edinburgh University. His belief in Smith's scientific powers was justified by the latter's brilliant reply to Huxley's address at the Belfast meeting of the British Association.

⁹ The "libel" or case against Robertson Smith was one of contravening, by his articles in the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, the doctrine of inspiration in the Westminster Confession of Faith, the confessional standard of the Presbyterian church. The General Assembly of the Free Church of Scotland in 1878 found, by a small majority, that this libel was "relevant," so far as concerned the charge of denying the Mosaic authorship of Deuteronomy. (We have traveled very far in Scotland since that day!) The case was then sent back to the presbytery of Aberdeen for proof. But the moral victory was felt to lie with the professor's opinions, and, as it turned out, he was acquitted by the presbytery, and again by the General Assembly of 1880 on a narrow majority of three. In the summer of that year new articles by Smith appeared in the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, and a commission of Assembly, in October, again suspended him from his duties. The General Assembly of 1881, without coming to a conclusion as to Smith's views, finally removed him, by an arbitrary use of its powers, from his chair. Soon afterward he removed to Cambridge, where he became fellow of Christ's College and professor of Arabic (for further details of the controversy see the present writer's *Life of Henry Drummond* for the years 1878 to 1881, and *Modern Criticism and the Preaching of the Old Testament*, Lecture VII). The prolonged trials before the presbytery and synod of Aberdeen and five General Assemblies, with Smith's public lectures since in Edinburgh and Glasgow (afterward published as *The Prophets of Israel* and *The Old Testament in the Jewish Church*), created universal excitement, and were the means of educating public opinion in Scotland in the new biblical criticism.

he took no public part in the movement. Yet, when the new views won their fight for liberty—though their protagonist was removed from his chair, they were never condemned—men felt that it was Davidson who was the real author of the greatest theological change that had come over Scotland for centuries. This, however, was not the only triumph of his influence which the controversy exhibited. There were those in Smith's party who forcibly blamed Davidson's silence and attributed it to timidity. They were wrong. The constitutional incapacity which he showed for public debate was not cowardice. One laughs at the idea who thinks of the courage of this man on the dark, lonely paths of spiritual questioning; the splendid solitude of his life; his native inability to hide scorn or contempt where scorn was needed; and the brave independence of his mind toward the most unquestioned authorities or the most fashionable tendencies in his own subject. His silence in Smith's case was not cowardice. The real triumph which the controversy brought to his influence was that men knew this; and that, when his student fell and he himself retained his position almost without having struck a blow in the battle, the respect and esteem in which he was held were greater than ever.

Yet the matter is undoubtedly the problem of Davidson's life. Why was he silent? There is more than one possible answer. His instincts were certainly not with bold and dogmatic assertions of opinions, whether new or old. Smith's methods of working toward the truth were not his methods; and he may have felt—and justly—that, even if he overcame his extraordinary shyness at public debate, he could only express his criticisms in a style and accent which would assist the cause less surely than the silent adherence, which was always obvious both to friends or foes. And, moreover, as he stood there, dumb beside his outspoken student, you could not help wondering whether the mysterious temper of the man—the elusiveness hinted at above—contained some feeling of the vanity of the whole business. I do not say he had this; but it would have been very like him to have it. No expositor of Ecclesiastes ever revealed such a startling sympathy with the mood of his author as Dr. Davidson

did to us in his class one morning when the Smith case was in course: "The resultlessness of all struggle for knowledge!"

But among all these possible influences passing between Davidson and Robertson Smith, the most difficult to estimate is that exercised upon the master's opinions by the movements of his more rapid and positive pupil. I approach it with diffidence. Davidson's temperament and the lack of published materials render an exact appreciation impossible.

Graf's revolutionary proposals to assign first the priestly legislation, and then the priestly history, in the Pentateuch to the exilic or post-exilic period, were made in 1866, when Robertson Smith entered New College, and in the following years. By 1870, when he was leaving New College (having meantime studied in Germany), Graf's proposals were adopted and elaborated by Kuenen, Wellhausen, and an increasing number of scholars. As the readers of the *BIBLICAL WORLD* know, the new views did not meet with universal acceptance. Several critics, with Dillmann at their head, though no longer adhering to the earlier theories of an origin for the Priestly Code in the eleventh or tenth century, refused to bring the document to a date later than Ezekiel, or even than Deuteronomy. Robertson Smith at first kept an open mind in the controversy; but afterward went over to the side of Graf, in his later *Encyclopædia Britannica* articles and in his lectures on the *Old Testament in the Jewish Church*.¹⁰ These facts are certain. What is doubtful is the date of Davidson's approach to the new views, as well as the extent of his adherence to them, and the degree to which he was drawn toward such adherence by the swifter convictions of his pupil. Davidson's published writings are not sufficient to answer the questions, but the following may be contributed toward a solution.

From Henry Drummond's notes of lectures, in 1870-71,¹¹ it

¹⁰ Delivered as lectures in Edinburgh and Glasgow in the winter of 1880-81 and published in April, 1881. See also the end of an article on "The Progress of Old Testament Studies," in the *British and Foreign Evangelical Review*, July, 1876. In the earlier *Encyclopædia Britannica* art. "Bible," Smith leaves the question still open.

¹¹ See *Life of Henry Drummond*, pp. 43 f. Davidson "did not then take his students beyond the positions reached by Ewald."

is clear that Davidson was then discoursing to his class on pentateuchal criticism; and, doubtless, with a leaning to the more conservative positions. Yet, after the controversy on Robertson Smith's articles broke out, Davidson dropped his lectures on the Pentateuch—they were not given to his students in the later seventies—and did not resume the subject till nine years later. To the class to which I belonged, in 1876–77, he gave as a reason for confining our attention to the eighth-century prophets, that with these writings, at least, we were sure we were on historical ground. This alone is evidence that his views were changing; and it is corroborated by the first published papers in which he returned to the subject. In 1888, in the *Theological Review*, a periodical¹² to which Davidson contributed some of the best theological criticisms of the last quarter of the century, he reviewed Delitzsch's *Commentary on Genesis*—the work in which that conservative critic adopted several of the new views—and Dillmann's *Commentary on Numbers, Deuteronomy, and Joshua*. In the first of these reviews¹³ Davidson inclines—one can hardly use a stronger word of any of his critical opinions—to an advanced position. He states the improbability of Moses having given one system of laws (Exod., chaps. 20 ff.) at Sinai and another so very different (Deuteronomy) on the plains of Moab; and the impossibility of conceiving of Deuteronomy as extant in the days of the judges and early monarchy. In the review of Dillmann¹⁴ he expresses his dissatisfaction with that scholar's theory of the origin for the Priestly Code in the eighth century, and leans to a later date. These are probably as explicit statements as he ever published on the subject. In his *Commentary on Ezekiel*,¹⁵ issued in 1892, he observes how familiar Ezekiel was with a ritual law, and how ancient the sources of such a law must have been. But he does not imply, what Dillmann maintains, that this was a written law—he calls it “consuetudinary”—and, of course, still less does he imply

¹² Edited by students of New College. It was a quarterly, and four annual volumes appeared (1886–87 to 1889–90; Edinburgh: Macniven & Wallace). Then it was replaced by the *Critical Review* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark), edited by Professor Salmond.

¹³ Five octavo pages.

¹⁴ Two octavo pages.

¹⁵ *Cambridge Bible for Schools*.

that it was the Priestly Code. He leaves the date of the latter an open question ; but appears to adhere—so far as the constitutional reserve of his mind allowed him to do so—to an exilic or post-exilic origin of the form in which we have this document. Yet he judged the bulk of its contents to be of a very early date, and to have come down through Israel's history by oral tradition.

These positions, then, Davidson took up after the Smith case was over. Whether he had reached them in earlier years, and how far Smith's arguments had moved him toward them, are questions to which no certain answer can be given. All we can say is that he approached the same conclusions, *with regard to the dates of the pentateuchal documents*, more slowly than his pupil did. But he was more careful, too, than the latter to point out the ancient character of many of the contents of even the latest of these documents, and thereby rendered an unmistakable service to the development of the critical theory. For nothing has produced more confusion, not to say panic, with regard to that theory than the failure to discriminate between the question of the dates of the documents of the Pentateuch and the dates of the origin of their contents. One or two years before his death he said to me that the older he grew the more he felt disposed to push back the latter to an early period. And finally—to complete this sketch of his opinions in the Pentateuch—he remained skeptical and even sarcastic of the finer distinctions to which so many critics have carried literary analysis within the limits of the four main pentateuchal documents.

[*To be concluded in the next number.*]